DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 159 CS 006 590

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TITLE Teachers' Understanding of the Reading Process.
PUB DATE Apr 82
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (27th, Chicago, IL, April 26-30, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Processes; Elementary School Teachers; *Knowledge Level; Language Processing; Reading Instruction; *Reading Processes; *Reading Research; *Reading Teachers; *Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

A study investigated the degree to which elementary school reading teachers understood the reading process. Thirty teachers were asked to respond to four questions: (1) Have you ever thought about what you do when you read? (2) Have you ever thought about how meaning is represented in written language? (3) When you are reading, what do you do when you encounter unrecognized or unknown words? and (4) Do you look at every word when you read? If the teacher responded affirmatively to questions 1, 2, and 4, he or she was asked several follow-up questions. Results showed that 13 of the teachers had never thought about what they do when they read; of those who said they had, a majority referred to reading as a process-oriented activity. Half of the teachers indicated that they had never thought about how meaning is represented in written language. The preferred means of dealing with unknown words was the processing of whole text, and 24 teachers thought it was unnecessary to look up every word that they did not know. The findings suggest that the teachers had not given much thought to the processing of written language, but that they intuitively knew quite a bit about the reading process from their own reading experiences. (FL)

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TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE READING PROCESS

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TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE READING PROCESS

What is the role of reading teachers? What should they know and what should they be doing to assist children achieve literacy? Smith (1978), McKenzie (1977) and Goodman (1977) suggest that teachers must not only have a working knowledge of the developmental nature of children but of the nature of the reading process as well:

> The teacher's role is not to be a blind purveyor of materials nor a cog - or a transistor - in a technology of instruction. The teacher's role is to motivate, encourage and help children to learn to read. To do this teachers must make reading meaningful, which means seeing how it looks from the child's point of view. Teachers must understand both children and reading. (Smith, p. 164)

> . . . The teacher's essential role is to set up a rich learning context, to provide a range of books and purposes and opportunities for reading, to pick up and interpret the signals given by the learner and provide the teaching she or he needs then. The teacher uses knowledge of language and the structures involved in literacy to do this, but doesn't overwhelm the learner with the task. (McKenzie, p. 323)

> The optimally effective teacher . . . is not a technician sequentially teaching and testing the skills assumed to be components of reading. Rather, a teacher must be knowledgable about linguistic and cognitive development, insightful in monitoring the progress of learners in acquiring the ability to get and express meaning through written language, able to plan experiences to help children to learn. (Goodman, p. 312)

Harste (1978) and Harris (1970) also supported the idea of teacher knowledge by inferring that optimal reading instruction depends in part on teachers' understanding of the reading process. Harste suggested that both the teaching and learning of reading are theoretically based and that it is more productive to look at reading instruction in terms of a theoretical orientation rather than in terms of reading approaches. Harris concluded that research into the cognitive aspects of reading should provide insights into how the process works which will in turn make teaching more precise and more enjoyable.

If teacher knowledge of the reading process is an essential component of effective instruction and learning, to what degree do teachers understand the reading process? To help answer this question, a literature search was conducted that revealed no studies dealing directly with teachers' understanding of the reading process. Three studies (Buike and Duffy, 1979; Bawden/ et al., 1979; Bawden and Duffy, 1979) were found which investigated the relationship between teachers' conceptions of reading and the effects such beliefs had on instruction. The term, "conceptions of reading" however, referred to reading methods and approaches rather than to the reading process per se.

The purpose of this study, then, was to investigate the degree to which elementary teachers understand the reading process. To generate data, the questions of the study - given below - were used as the basis for interviewing thirty teachers.

1. Have you ever thought about what you do when you read? If so, what do you think you do when you read?
2. Have you ever thought about how meaning is represented in written language? If so, how do you think meaning is represented in written language?
3. When you're reading, what do you do when you encounter unrecognized or unknown words?
4. Do you look at every word when you read? Do you think you should? Why or why not?

During each interview, the investigator recorded teachers' oral responses on a prepared form.

Stratified random sampling procedures were used to identify the thirty subjects from the total population of 94 elementary teachers (grades 1-6) in a local school district adjacent to a midwestern city of approximately 50,000 residents. Because most of the teacher responses were very brief and indefinitive, they were categorized according to their inferred meanings. To validate the reliability of such categorizing, percentages of agreement were calculated based on the category selections of two independent raters for

each of the four questions: Question one - 89 and 93%; Question two - 87 and 93%; Question three - 93 and 100%; and Question four - 87 and 79%.

Results

The data were analyzed according to the four questions of the study.

Question 1: Have You Ever Thought About What You Do When You Read?

Thirteen of the 30 teachers interviewed (43%) indicated that they had not thought about what they do when they read. The 17 teachers who answered the question affirmatively (57%) were then asked, "What do you think you do when you read?" Of the inferred responses listed in Table 1, it can be seen that the first five categories (68%) were process oriented, with over half of these responses (36%) describing reading in terms of mental processing. Teachers' actual responses in the mental processing category included: "Process of looking at words and thinking of what I've read", "Eye and brain - things happen in a certain way", and "Mind's working and trying to sort through material and comprehend." Note also (Table 1) that the last three categories (32%) associated reading with purposes, affect and products as illustrated respectively by the following statements: "Read to gain information most of the time," "Cry a lot," and "Makes you become aware of things around you."

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Insert Table 1 about here.

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TABLE 1

Number and Percentage of Teachers' Inferred Responses Related to the Question, "What Do You Think You Do When You Read?"

Types of Responses	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses
Mental Processing - Process of viewing print and using one's brain/mind to think about/assimilate what's being read which is often accompanied by mental pictures.	10	36
Decoding - Process of visually discriminating among patterns of print and associating them with phonological patterns.	2	7
Perception - Process of reading straight down a page - not side to side - reading whole paragraphs with a single glance.	2	7
Prediction - Process of anticipating what's coming next without reading every word. Applies to normal reading as well as to skimming.	2	7
Reader-Author Communication - Process of trying to put yourself in the place of an author in order to determine what he's trying to say/tell you.	3	11
Purposes - Reading for various purposes such as gaining information and/or reading for fun.	2	7
Affect - Becoming so totally submerged/ submersed in a book that you feel as if you are in another time, place or situation. This experience produces various feelings within readers, i.e. exciting, restful, sad, etc.	6	21
Products - Reading makes you become aware of certain aspects of your environment which you haven't seen or thought of before.	1	4
TOTAL	28	100

Question 2: Have You Ever Thought About How Meaning Is Represented in Written Language?

There was a 50-50 percent split between teachers who indicated that they had never thought about how meaning is represented in written language, and those who indicated they had. Again, those teachers who responsed affirmatively (50%) were asked, "How do you think meaning is represented in written language?" Thirty-four percent (7 and 27%) of the responses (Table 2) pertaining to this question indicated that meaning is related to written language by visual symbols and words. Sample responses from these two categories were: "Visual symbols and meaning", and "Choice of words. Some are more intense than others. They set moods or feelings."

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Insert Table 2 about here.

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On the other hand, 66 percent (13 + 53%) of the responses referred to the syntactical function of language and the processing of text at a deeper level. Actual responses included: "How words go together in sentences", and "Ambiguous, each reader reads his own meaning into the print."

Question 3: When You're Reading, What Do You Do When You Encounter Unrecognized or Unknown Words?

Notice in Table 3, that 53 percent of the responses (first two categories) indicated a preference for processing whole text to determine the identity of unknown/unrecognized words. Actual responses included statements such as: "Skip it and go on", and "Occasionally look it up. It's good to pass over unknown word and see if I can get the meaning elsewhere."

TABLE 2

Number and Percentage of Teachers' Inferred Responses Related to the Question, "How Do You Think Meaning Is Represented in Written Language?"

Types of Responses	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses
Meaning is represented by visual symbols.	1	7
Meaning is represented by words.	4	27
Meaning is related to the way words function syntactically.	2	13
Meaning is indirectly related to print and is processed at a deeper level in light of an author's/reader's thoughts and experiences.	8	53
Total	15	100

TABLE 3

Number and Percentage of Teachers' Inferred Responses Related to the Question, "When You're Reading, What Do You Do When You Encounter Unrecognized or Unknown Words?"

Types of Responses	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses
Read again or go on to see whether I can figure it out or skip it.	4	13
Usually try to figure identity or meaning of a word from context. If I'm not successful, I'll go to the dictionary or skip it.	12	40
I "sound-it-out". Then, if I can't get it from context, I'll look it up.	1	3
First "sound-it-out". Then look it up.	5	17
Look it up in the dictionary.	4	13
If not interested, I let it go or use context clues. If interested, I look it up.	2	7
When reading a novel for pleasure, I skip it or use context; when reading for information for a class, I look it up.	2	7
Total	30	100

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Insert Table 3 about here.

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Table 3 also shows that 20 percent (3 and 17%) of the responses referred to the "sound-it-out" way. Furthermore, it should be noted that 30 percent (17 and 13%) of the responses failed to mention the use of context at all. Responses in the last two categories (14%) related decoding strategies with reader interest and types of reading.

Question 4: Do You Look At Every Word When You Read? Do You Think You Should? Why or Why Not?

Only one teacher (3%) answered the first two questions affirmatively. When asked why she thought she should look at every word, she replied, "I enjoy every word . . ." She qualified her reply, however, as she continued- ". . but when I study, I don't look at every word."

Five other teachers (17%) gave inconsistent answers. Three (10%) of them indicated that they did look at every word, but didn't think they should; while the other two teachers (7%) said they didn't look at every word, but felt that they should.

The remaining 24 teachers (80%), though, claimed that they did not look at every word, nor did they think that it was necessary. When asked, "Why don't you think its necessary to look at every word when you read?", Table 4 shows that 54 percent (17, 29 and 8%) of their responses were meaning-centered. That is: "Looking mainly for key ideas and words," "A lot of it is intuitive. You know what's there - small words", and "Slows me down. I pick up enough for meaning."

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Insert Table 4 about here.

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TABLE 4

Number and Percentage of Teachers' Inferred Responses Related to the Question, "Why Don't You Think It Is Necessary to Look At Every Word When You Read?"

Types of Responses	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses
Not necessary - reading is a predictive, meaning-centered process.	4	17
Not necessary - can derive meaning without looking at every word.	7	29
Slows me down making comprehension difficult.	2	8
Not necessary if reading fiction for enjoyment. However, it is necessary if reading poetry or informational material.	9	38
Not necessary because of perceptual abilities.	1	4
Some books are wordy.	1	4
Total	24	100

Interestingly, the nine responses in the fourth category (38%) in Table 4 indicated that these teachers did not think it was necessary to look at every word while reading for enjoyment, but did think every word should be perceived when reading poetry or "informational" material. Actual responses included: "Don't need to when reading fiction for enjoyment. See every word though when reading textbooks", and "I get the general idea without every word. When I read for content, I do read every word."

Discussion

The first two questions of this study required teachers to think objectively about language and the nature of the reading process. Such objective thinking about language appeared to be much more abstract and difficult for teachers than the more subjective responses called for in Questions 3 and 4. Here, teachers could draw on their personal reading experiences for responses and not be so dependent on theoretical constructs and ideas. The data seem quite clear at this point. That is, in Questions 1 and 2, almost half the teachers (43 and 50%) indicated they had not thought about the given topics, while all teachers responded to Questions 3 and 4.

It is also significant to note the quality of their responses. For example, of the 17 teachers who answered Question 1 affirmatively, 68 percent (total of the first five categories in Table 1) of their follow-up responses referred to reading as a process-oriented activity. It should also be noted (Table 2) that of the responses related to Question 2, 66 percent (13 + 53%) were higher-level replies relating meaning to the syntactical function of language and to the deeper levels of language processing, rather than to words and visual symbols which would imply one to one correspondences between cognition and language.

Most of the responses to Question 3 were also meaning-centered. Table 3 shows that only 30 percent (17 + 13%) of the responses failed to refer to contextual cues, while the other 70 percent designated the use of context to some degree. Twenty percent (3 + 17%), however, seemed to demonstrate linguistic naiveté by referring to the "sound-it-out" way as a primary decoding strategy. A very encouraging finding, however, is that 53 percent of the responses to Question 3 (first two categories in Table 3) emphasized the processing of whole language which is in accord with language-learning research.

Question 4 also elicited many defensible responses. Of the 24 teachers who thought it was not necessary to look at every word and didn't think they should, Table 4 shows that 22 (92%) - first four categories - gave responses which were meaning centered and to a great extent in keeping with recent reading and language-processing research. In the nine responses (38%) which inferred that it is necessary to look at every word when reading poetry or "informational" materials, teachers were probably assuming that the ideas expressed in such selections are more subtle/complex and/or unfamiliar, which would require the processing of more print (relatively speaking) than recreational reading which is generally written in prose about more familiar topics.

In conclusion, it would appear that the teachers of this study have not given much thought to the processing of written language. This was reflected not only by their brief, fragmented and indefinitive responses, but also by the large percentage of teachers who indicated they had not thought about the understandings inherent in Questions 1 and 2. On the other hand, the positive quality of the responses which were given would seem to indicate that teachers in the local school district intuitively know quite a bit about the reading process from their own reading experiences, but are not able to articulate this

tacit knowledge to any great extent, nor do they seem to sense a need for doing so.

If the reading teacher's role is one of helping children become successfully involved in the reading process, it would appear that teachers need an improved understanding of that process. It would also appear that learning to read needs to be thought of as implicit language-learning rather than the conscious acquisition of isolated "skills." Not until reading teachers begin thinking of themselves as facilitators of such language learning will instruction become more in keeping with children's unfathomable language-processing abilities.

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